

The art of letting go

We return to old friendships and revisit places and ambitions, expecting to feel the same. When we don't, we assume something is missing. In reality, something has simply changed "us", and we haven't caught up to ourselves yet.

MUEEN WALEE MAHEER

We all have a locked chest existing in a half-physical, half-unnamed place. Inside it remains fragments of a self that had hoped to exist but never fully did. The dream of walking down the corridor of that institution. A gift from someone who hurt you, someone you once couldn't imagine a day without. Inside jokes that no longer belong to anyone. Certificates from goals you no longer care about.

They just stay. Untouched, unresolved, solemnly waiting.

And yet the moment someone suggests letting them go, something within us tightens. A resistance rises, disproportionate but undeniable.

The easy explanation is sunk cost: you've invested time, emotion, and years, so abandoning it feels like a waste. But sunk cost explains bad investments, not heartbreak. It explains why you might finish an overpriced, disappointing meal, but not why you still catch yourself daydreaming about someone you've sworn you've moved on from.

The real reason runs deeper than economics. It runs straight into identity.

These things persist not because

they still belong in your life, but because they've been absorbed into who you are. Like artefacts in a backroom archive, they're no longer part of the story unfolding. But they still take part in the story being told. We don't hold onto things. We hold onto who we were when they made sense. And as long as we hold onto that person, we cannot fully become the next one.

Jay Gatsby is the clearest proof of this. We think he loves Daisy Buchanan — but that's not quite right. What he loves is the person he became while loving her: the man with a green light across the water and a reason to reach for it. Five years of rebuilding himself into someone worthy of her is really just one long attempt to resurrect a self that he's already lost. And by the time he finds Daisy again, that self is gone. The

tragedy of Gatsby isn't that he can't have her. It's that the version of him who wanted her no longer exists, and he never noticed.

We do this too, just more unobtrusively. We return to old friendships and revisit places and ambitions, expecting to feel the same. When we don't, we assume something is missing. In reality, something has simply changed "us", and we haven't caught up to ourselves yet.

The opposite error is just as damaging.

Raskolnikov, in *Crime and Punishment*, convinces himself that shedding his conscience will elevate him beyond ordinary men. The murder isn't just a crime; it's an experiment in self-reinvention. He lets go of the

one thing he believed was holding him back, and it destroys him completely.

He treats his conscience like a heavy winter coat, something which can be shrugged off to move faster. He realised too late that it was his skin, not his garment. What follows isn't divine punishment. It's the raw shock of a body that has flayed itself alive in the name of freedom.

This is what forced letting go actually looks like. Deleting every photo. Cutting off entire friend groups. Becoming someone new overnight. It feels like control. More often, it's just running away from something you never actually resolved.

So, if desperate clinging hollows you out and violent discarding breaks you, what does genuine release look like?

Marcus Aurelius didn't say "move on". He said something more precise: you cannot control what happens to you, only your relationship to it. *Amor fati*, love of fate, is not resignation. It is refusing to

make peace conditional on recovering something already lost.

Consider the student who spent years preparing for a future they thought they wanted or were told to want. When it doesn't happen, the grief is real. Not just for the outcome, but also for the version of themselves that had already been imagined, already made real in someone else's expectations.

Amor fati asks something difficult: grieve what was real, honour the effort that was yours, and then cease making your happiness dependent on a future that no longer exists. You have to let it go.

The self is not a sculpture that cracks when chipped; rather, it's a river, always moving, always reshaping itself around new ground. The chest remains a vessel for the version of yourself you once were. Clearing it is not betrayal. It is simply making room for the person you have, without quite realising it, already become.

Mueen Walee Maheer is an aspiring polymath who is currently a master of none but a fan of many. Send him a new obsession at mueenwaleemaheer@gmail.com



Understanding the nuances of self-projection in reading fiction

NUZHAT TAHIYA

There's a particular experience every reader is intimately familiar with: you're 250 pages deep into a novel, and suddenly a character does something that feels wrong — not poorly written, not out of character, but wrong in a way that stings personally. Perhaps they choose ambition over loyalty, or they forgive someone you wouldn't forgive, or they're content with a life you'd find stifling. The disappointment is real. You might even close the book.

This reaction reveals something significant about how we consume fiction. When we engage with stories primarily through self-projection — treating characters as vessels for our own experiences, values, and desires — we risk missing much of what fiction has to offer. More troublingly, we risk becoming hostile readers unable to appreciate narratives that don't reflect us.

Self-projection isn't inherently problematic. We naturally seek connection with fictional characters, and finding echoes of our own struggles in their stories can be profoundly meaningful. The danger emerges when projection becomes the primary or only lens through which we engage with narrative art. When we need characters to think like us, we've transformed fiction from a window into a mirror.

Consider the common online discourse around "problematic" characters. When audiences project themselves onto protagonists, they often struggle to accept that their stand-in might be flawed, morally complex, or even villainous. For instance, when Nabokov puts us inside Humbert Humbert's head, or when we are asked to sympathise with morally compromised characters, the point isn't to validate these perspectives but to unsettle us, to make us grapple with uncomfortable truths about human nature.

A character's mistakes become personal attacks; their moral failures feel like accusations. This leads to bizarre interpretive gymnastics where viewers bend over backwards to justify inexcusable actions or, conversely, reject entire

works because they can't bear to identify with someone imperfect. We see this in fan communities that wage wars over whether a character "deserves" redemption, as though their fictional arc were a referendum on the audience's own worthiness.

The economics of modern media have amplified this problem. Streaming platforms and social media algorithms excel at giving us more of what we already like, creating echo chambers of taste. Fan service has become a business model, with creators increasingly expected to deliver exactly what audiences project onto their works. We've seen beloved series derailed by desperate attempts to satisfy



ILLUSTRATION: ZABIN TAZRIN NASHITA

every faction of a splintered fanbase, each insisting their interpretation is the "correct" one because it aligns with their self-projection.

There's also something infantilising about the expectation that fiction should always comfort us, always reflect us back to ourselves in flattering ways. It treats art as a mirror meant only for admiration rather than a window into other lives and other ways of being. Children naturally engage with stories by putting themselves at the centre — every kid imagines themselves as the hero. Mature engagement with fiction requires growing past this, developing the capacity to care about characters who aren't us and to invest in stories that don't centre our experiences.

This isn't an argument against identification or emotional investment in media. Living vicariously through characters in a story we care about is one of fiction's greatest pleasures. The issue is when identification becomes so totalistic that we lose the ability to observe, to analyse, or to sit with discomfort. When we can't tell the difference between "this character is like me" and "this character is me", we collapse the necessary distance that allows fiction to do its work.

The remedy isn't to abandon emotional engagement but to cultivate critical empathy — the ability to understand and feel with characters while maintaining

enough separation to see them clearly. This means asking not just how this character reflects me but who this character is within the context of the story. It means tolerating the discomfort of identifying with flawed people and the challenge of caring about those unlike ourselves.

Fiction at its best expands our capacity for experience beyond the limitations of our single lives. But it can only do this if we let it, if we resist the urge to make every story about us. The mirror is a comfortable place to look, but the world beyond it is so much larger. When we insist on seeing only our own reflection, we don't just limit our understanding of the story — we miss the chance to be changed by it.

Tender machinery of memory and knowledge

A simple guide to the Internet Archive

ALEENA YUSRA

The internet is a captivating, interconnected system of electronic devices that revolutionised the world as we know it today. However, beneath the glow of tech advancements lies the melancholic, sentimental presence in everyone's life. People began leaving pieces of themselves on the internet: cliché blogs, fandom forums, pixelated websites, and strange communities formed over shared interests.

However, the internet can forget, whether it be because of domain expiration or link rot.

Amid this current brutal cycle of monetisation and amnesia, the Internet Archive is one of the last gentle things online. It is a volunteer-supported digital library dedicated to preserving everything the modern web forgets: old websites, out-of-print books, abandoned games, and forgotten human traces still have a home here. It's also a love letter to curiosity, existing as the opposite of algorithmic feeds. Here, you can fall into rabbit holes no one engineered for you.

At its core lie two systems: the Wayback Machine and the general collection.

The Wayback Machine
The Wayback Machine is the Archive's flagship feature, boasting over a trillion archived web pages spanning nearly three decades.

Inserting website URLs and keywords relating to a site's name into the search box brings up the website with a timeline graph that lets you pick the specific year you're interested in. Choose a year, and a calendar appears with specific dates marked by a circle representing a preserved snapshot.

On the homepage lies the "save page now" feature, which allows anyone to archive any webpage instantly, whether it's a citation you need to preserve or a Tumblr blog about the cathartic experience of discovering Kurt Cobain at the age of 11.

General collection
The general collection is a divine ecosystem of knowledge and media that reflects the true soul and philosophy of the internet, consisting of hundreds of millions



ILLUSTRATION: ABIR HOSSAIN

of archived media.

Searching them effectively is key. Next to the site search bar is a drop-down menu. "Search Metadata" skims through titles, creator, description, date, and publisher. "Search Text Contents" searches inside the pages of millions of scanned books and documents for your keywords or phrases. Other filters allow searching through TV news captions or radio transcripts.

After any search, the left-side filters use faceted filtering to quickly narrow down results by media type, year, language, and collection.

Media formats
Each media segment offers countless unique and niche collections worth exploring. The drop-down list from the media icons presents its featured and top collections. Downloads for most media appear on the item page itself. To download lost, archived YouTube videos using the Wayback Machine, a command-line tool like "yt-dlp" is recommended.

The archive individually connects us all to the becoming of history through the "Upload" option at the top bar. Any relics of your life can be shared, be it a family photo or an Eid meal recipe.

The Archive's media collections are intimate yet revealing. The Prelinger Archives, for instance, preserve short-lived videos that reveal forgotten social norms and aesthetics. Moreover, broadcast news segments saved the texture of historic moments as they unfolded.

Its text collections extend this

repository of human experience. Users can lose themselves looking through personal ancestry through the Genealogy archive while also exploring the world's oldest digital library with tens of thousands of e-books still available.

The audio archives are strong with sentiment and connection. One of its famous archives is a legendary collection of fan-recorded tapes from the rock band Grateful Dead. There's also Netlabel Archives, which was an early 2000s hub of independent, experimental, electronic sounds.

Image archives range from breathtaking NASA astronomy images to user-uploaded photographs documenting the Occupy movement. The riveting software segment presents thrills like the Internet Arcade: a door into the coin-op culture of video games with a fully playable, browser-based classic arcade.

The archive, unfortunately, faces multiple threats from corporations or hacker groups that challenge its right to preserve culture through lawsuits, takedowns, and pressure to erase politically inconvenient histories. It is important to stand with the Archive during these times because, in the end, the Internet Archive is a simple non-profit with a vision of universal access to all knowledge, and it deserves our protection.

Aleena is a struggling student who loves robots and revolutions. Send her your esoteric online archives at aleenayusra33@gmail.com.